

LITHUANIA AND THE AUTONOMY OF POLAND

WITH A MAP

BY
J. GABRYS

Reprinted from *The British Review*, February, 1915



PUBLISHED BY
THE LITHUANIAN INFORMATION BUREAU
PARIS, 41, BD. DES BATIGNOLLES



LITHUANIA AND THE AUTONOMY OF POLAND

CAN LITHUANIA FORM PART OF AN AUTONOMOUS POLAND?

BY his proclamation to the Poles promulgated after the beginning of the war the Grand Duke Nicholas promised to obliterate the boundaries which divide them, and to reunite the whole race in a single State. There is no doubt that Poland deserves a wide measure of autonomy. Dismembered over a hundred years ago by its neighbours, Prussia, Austria, and Russia, this unhappy country has since then been subjected to every possible form of persecution. But the struggle which has broken out in Europe already permits us to envisage the resurrection not merely of Poland but also of several other nations which have been absorbed in the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires.

Nevertheless, the question of Polish autonomy is much more complex than is generally supposed. We have yet to learn what Poland it is that will receive autonomy; whether it is to be granted to the historic Poland, as represented by the Lithuano-Polish state, the boundaries of which stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea, or merely to racial Poland, to the country, that is to say, in which the majority of the population is of pure Polish stock. And in order to answer this question, we must first of all examine the actual text of the proclamation issued by the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian armies, which proclamation says, *inter alia*, "that no more will be demanded from the Poles than *respect for the rights of*

LITHUANIA AND AUTONOMY OF POLAND

racés united to them by historic ties," a passage which leads one to suppose that, at the beginning of the war, the Russian Government was prepared to grant autonomy to historic Poland as constituted before the first partition of 1772.

Is it possible to revive historic Poland ?

Before coming to a conclusion on the point, it will be well to inquire what it was, and for what reasons it was unable to have a long life. At the time of the partition, Poland was a dual state, Lithuano-Polish, comparable to Austria-Hungary : and in that union Poland held the position of Austria in the modern counterpart, while Lithuania held that of Hungary. The relations between the two nations date back to the thirteenth century, when Lithuanian troops occupied and devastated Poland, carrying away with them thousands of prisoners. In the fourteenth century, Aldona, the daughter of Gediminas, Grand Duke of Lithuania from 1316 to 1340, married Casimir, the son of the King of Poland, and brought with her a dowry of 24,000 Polish prisoners of war set free by her father. These facts are sufficient to prove that Lithuania was a formidable neighbour whom it was not safe to ignore, and from that time the Poles sought to establish friendly relations with her.

Events favoured the desired reconciliation, which came about in 1386 on the occasion of the marriage of the Grand Duke Jagiello with Edwige, Queen of Poland. Lithuania, which then possessed territory three times the extent of that held by Poland, concluded no more by this marriage than a dynastic union, a bond of the most precarious kind. But basing their claim on these facts, the Poles went so far as to exact a hegemony and the preponderating power in Lithuania. They still consider as their enemies all Lithuanians who, remaining faithful to their mother-tongue,

LITHUANIA AND AUTONOMY OF POLAND

develop their literature and defend their nationality, and look on them in the light of separatists and the worst opponents of historic tradition.

According to Poles, history has exemplified the ideal union of Poland and Lithuania. Nevertheless, an impartial examination of the past shows a continual tendency among the Lithuanians to break with Poland. The first separatist was the Lithuanian Grand Duke Vytautas, who proclaimed himself king of the country, and only awaited the crown sent by the Emperor Sigismund to have himself consecrated. The Poles, however, stopped the envoys charged to restore the crown to Vytautas, who died suddenly immediately afterwards. The union was interrupted on several occasions (1490, 1492, and 1526), when the Lithuanians chose sovereigns for themselves independently of Poland. In the seventeenth century, when both nations were ravaged by the Swedes and Russians, Lithuanian nobles, such as Prince Radziwill and others, broke away from Poland to save their country by an alliance with Sweden. The Lithuanian Prince Sapieha and several of his supporters were assassinated by the Poles on November 24, 1700, for attempting to bring about a separation. Other illustrious members of the Lithuanian nobility, among them Prince Michael Koributh Wisnioviecki, generalissimo of the Lithuanian army, Prince Gregory Oginski, general of the forces of Samogitia, Jean Pac, Prince Charles Radziwill, Chancellor of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Prince Michael Oginski, Minister of Finance, etc., in order to rid themselves of Polish interference, signed a covenant renouncing all the privileges granted to them by Poland, and attempted to restore the national government of Lithuania as it had existed before the union.

The Lithuanian separatist movement manifested itself

LITHUANIA AND AUTONOMY OF POLAND

continuously, even at the time of the insurrection stirred up by Kosciusko, when Lithuania again set up a government distinct from that of Poland. In 1863, after the last Polish insurrection, the Lithuanian "dictator", Kalinowski, declared that Lithuania would struggle for its own freedom, like Poland, but that it would always remain independent of its neighbour. "Never again", said he, "can we put the destinies of Lithuania in the hands of the godmother of Warsaw."

These few historic facts, which could be multiplied indefinitely, show that the union between Lithuania and Poland only existed, so to speak, on paper. The Poles were obliged to renew the act of union again and again. The Union of Krevo (1385) was followed by several others : the union of Vilna (1401), the union of Horodlo (1413), the union of Vilna (1432), the Union of Grodna (1501), the union of Grodna (1512), the union of Lublin (1569), the union of Brest (1596), and the union of Vilna (1812). This series of enactments proves that the Poles were at some pains to keep Lithuania under their protectorate.

The last links between the two were snapped by Russia, which annexed almost the whole of Lithuania and the greater part of Poland. In consequence, the partnership was broken by the force of events, and was thereafter considered as non-existent by the Lithuanians, who never regretted the dissolution of a union which had brought them so much misfortune. For Poland was never a sincere ally. Not only did she fail in her engagements concerning the defensive union, but she weakened Lithuania by sowing seeds of discord among the various factions of the country and by depriving it of its richest provinces, Podolia, Volynia and Kiovia. It is clear that this dual State, composed of two nations of which one (Poland) endeavoured to annihilate the other (Lithuania), could

LITHUANIA AND AUTONOMY OF POLAND

not continue to exist, but was bound to fall apart in consequence of the intestine quarrels of the two populations. And to attempt the reconstruction of Poland on the same historic foundations would be to commit the same mistakes and bring about the same results.

Having reviewed the past relations between the Lithuanians and the Poles, it remains to consider those now subsisting. The Poles still look upon Lithuania as a part of Poland—which it never was, even during the union—and the Polish Nationalists are untiring in their efforts to attach it to themselves. They indulge in a vigorous propaganda through the medium of the press, the schools, and, above all, their clergy, who desire to impose upon the Lithuanians the use of the Polish language in their religious services in order to achieve as promptly as possible the Polonisation of the country.

The Polish character of the Church as a political institution became especially definite in Lithuania after the disruption of the Lithuano-Polish state. The Poles had no other method of Polonisation than the Church, and they received powerful support from the Catholic clergy. The diocese of Vilna, headed by the chapter of the episcopal see, is peculiarly energetic in their service, and is more active in polonising the Lithuanians than in instructing them in Christian faith and morals. They use all the means at their command, and both the pulpit and the confessional are turned into schools for teaching the Polish tongue. For some time past the Polish bishops of Vilna have pursued a singular policy in the nomination of priests, sending to Lithuanian parishes curates who speak only Polish. So far from troubling to learn the speech of the country, these priests have imposed Polish upon their parishioners.

From 1864 to 1904 this ecclesiastical Polonisation was further forwarded by the Russian Government's interdict

LITHUANIA AND AUTONOMY OF POLAND

against the printing of Lithuanian books in Latin character, in consequence of which the Lithuanians were forced to use Polish devotional books. After the ukase of 1904 authorising the printing of Lithuanian books, numerous journals sprang up at Vilna, Kovna, and Seina, the national conscience of the people developed, and the worshippers began to exact from their clergy the use of Lithuanian in the celebration of religious services. This was the cause of numerous quarrels, the Polish clergy claiming to maintain the *status quo* and refusing to allow Lithuanian to be spoken in the churches; but now, after several years of friction, they have given way in several places, and even in Vilna a church has been reserved exclusively for the use of Lithuanians.

Polish Nationalists consider these legitimate concessions as a defeat for their party. They have decided to recover at any cost their lost positions and to prevent the introduction of Lithuanian in any parish of the diocese, and with this object have embarked upon a ferocious propaganda which does not stop even at actual violence. Sanguinary encounters with candelabra have taken place in Lithuanian churches, and fanatics have been seen to draw blood from defenceless women guilty of the "crime" of singing the canticles in their mother tongue, as was the case in several parishes of the diocese of Vilna—Assava, Rodune, Jonichkis, Kurmelava, and others.

The Lithuanians were obliged to address themselves to the Holy See and sent thither a Memorandum upon the Situation of the Lithuanian Catholics of the Diocese of Vilna. After setting forth the abnormal condition of the Catholic Church in Lithuania, the signatories made the following supplication to His Holiness :—

1. To recognize the Catholic Church of Lithuania as independent of that of Poland, separating the two,

LITHUANIA AND AUTONOMY OF POLAND

since the Lithuanians and Poles are two widely different races.

2. To create a Lithuanian archbishopric composed of the bishoprics of Vilna, Samogitia, and Seina, with an archbishop at Vilna, the ancient capital of Lithuania.

3. To select the bishops and archbishop of Lithuania from Lithuanians who understand and are attached to the Lithuanian people and speech.

4. To send all the letters from the Holy Apostolic See, bulls, evangelical letters, etc., direct to the Lithuanian bishops, without transmitting them through the bishops of Poland; and to mention Lithuania separately from Poland in the enumeration of Catholic countries.

5. To divest the Polonising bishops of their functions in Lithuania, and to replace them by Lithuanian bishops.

6. To dissolve the Polonising chapter of the diocese of Vilna, as being the chief source of anarchy and disorder in that diocese, and to reconstitute it by the election of new members.

The signatories further requested the Holy See to send a commission of impartial ecclesiastics to inquire into the state of the Catholic Church in Lithuania. Up to the present, however, the Vatican has unfortunately lent ear too readily to Polish calumny without troubling to investigate on its own behalf facts which are within its competent jurisdiction. And so long as the Polish nationalists continue to commit violent acts of the kind mentioned, there will never be any hope of the Lithuanians living with them on good terms.

Such are the relations in the religious sphere, the sole sphere in which the Poles have maintained their influence. It is clear that, should the Polish clergy in Lithuania receive in addition the support of the authorities of an independent Poland, the bonds between the parties,

LITHUANIA AND AUTONOMY OF POLAND

already stretched to breaking point, would be completely severed, with consequences probably most injurious to Catholicism. Considering all this, is it possible to expect from the Poles "respect for the rights of races united to them by historic ties", as the Grand Duke Nicholas suggests in his proclamation?

This short account makes it evident that the relations between Poland and Lithuania have never been so close in the past as the Poles would maintain. There was no more than a simple dynastic union, an offensive and defensive alliance, which was afterwards turned into a political union. That union was cancelled later by the force of events, when the Lithuano-Polish State was dismembered by its neighbours and, in consequence, could no longer serve as a ground for the present Polish claims on Lithuania. And as for present-day conditions, the Lithuanians have no further cause to flatter themselves upon their relations with the Poles, whose utter intransigence gives no hope of finding a common ground of agreement. The Poles desire to impose their protectorate, their language, and their political ideas on Lithuania, resting their claim upon a historic tradition which they interpret in their own way and in a sense favourable to their own interests. In these circumstances, the reconstitution of independent Poland within the boundaries of the old Lithuano-Polish State is unthinkable.

Such a reconstitution would violate, in the first place, the principle of nationality—not merely that of Lithuania, but also of part of the Lettish people and the people of White Russia and the Ukraine. Without dealing further with these three latter races, among which the national revival is becoming more and more vigorous, I think I have made the condition of affairs between Poles and Lithuanians up to the present sufficiently clear. If Lithuania

LITHUANIA AND AUTONOMY OF POLAND

were to be attached to an independent Polish State, that State would become a hot-bed of anarchy and disorder, as it was before the partition of 1772. It would fall to pieces as the old Lithuano-Polish State did, and, instead of being a factor in the peace and stability of Europe, it would become the cause of future wars. If Europe desires to ensure a permanent peace, she must not violate the principle of nationality, but, on the contrary, use it as a guide in reconstituting her map.

Founded upon that principle, Poland, Lithuania, and all other nationalities conscious of their own existence as such should receive their complete independence upon a racial basis in order that they may satisfy their aspirations. An autonomous Poland should be built upon the nine departments of Russian Poland; the department of Suvalki, which is purely Lithuanian and was unjustly attached to Poland by the Congress of Vienna in 1815, should be separated from it and returned to an autonomous Lithuania. And Lithuania, if it is founded upon racial principles, should contain the departments of Suvalki, Kovna, Vilna, and Grodna, while the Letts of the Baltic Provinces, bound to Lithuania by common nationality and economic interests, could form some kind of federation with them.

J. GABRYS.